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ABSTRACT

Feminism is experiencing a similar dual crisis in the United States and France. One aspect of this crisis, the movement's alignment with other groups, is destructive, inevitably leading to the subordination of women's issues to "human" issues. The other dimension of the crisis, internal differences, is potentially creative, offering the opportunity to grow through discussion and group dynamics. In the United States, the first aspect of the crisis is reflected in the notion of second stagism expressed by Betty Friedan and others: separatist feminism has fulfilled its purpose and both sexes can now work together. The second facet of the American crisis is reflected primarily in undercurrents of racism and anti-Semitism within the movement. In France, the position of one feminist group, the "mouvement de la liberation des femmes" (MLF) is the focal point of the crisis. This group endangers the French movement in two ways, by claiming leadership of the entire movement while simultaneously fractionalizing the movement through self-separation. Within the MLF and among this group and others, accusations of reformism and radicalism undermine feminist objectives. Despite these crises, considerable insight can be gained by both French and American feminists through cross-cultural communication. In addition to highlighting different pitfalls, such a dialogue is essential to keeping the movement totally feminist. This condition, in turn, is critical to the realization of feminist goals. (LP)

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CRISIS IN FEMINISM: THE UNITED STATES AND FRANCE

by
Charlotte Hogsett

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Paper presented at the National Women's Studies Association Conference
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Crisis in Feminism: The United States and France
(A paper read by Charlotte Hogsett at the National Women's Studies Association convention, Columbus, Ohio, June 29, 1983)

I first became aware that hard times had fallen upon the American women's movement upon reading Betty Friedan's The Second Stage (Simon and Schuster, 1981). The great prophetess of second-stagism has reached a large audience by having been reprinted in part in Sunday newspaper supplements. Her message has been picked up gleefully by the establishment press which promptly invented its own term for the movement: postfeminism. We are told that feminism as we know it is dead or dying, and rightly so. It has fulfilled its purpose. Many men have now seen the light and will join us in a second stage, as we work together now toward a better world. I oppose such a movement because, noting that whenever feminism has chosen to align itself with some other political or social movement, it has been swallowed up rather than advanced.

But if Betty Friedan were the only spokesperson for second stagism I would not view her intervention as a crisis, despite the fact that as a kind of elder stateswoman she can have and has had considerable influence both inside and outside the movement. It is neither her thought nor her influence which is basically disturbing, but rather the fact that one can see second-stagism in writers who have not been influenced directly by Friedan and who in some cases are very different from her. let me give, first, a quick and rather banal example, that of Carole Tavris, coauthor of The Longest War (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977), a frequently-used textbook on sex-roles and, most recently, author of a book called Anger (Simon and Schuster, 1982). In this latter

book it seems to me that Tavris tries to defuse her own past rage, suggested in the title to her former book. She talks about group anger in the following terms:

> Rage, I believe, is essential to the first phase (emphasis mine) of a social movement. It unifies disparate members of the group against a common enemy; the group becomes defined by its anger. (p. 248)

Clearly Tavris believes that the time for anger (war) is over; she advises women to accept their half of the responsibility for their plight. A second stage.

Second-stagism is much harder to confront when it comes from such a sensitive, intelligent, and committed writer as Robin Morgan. Already at the end of Going Too Far (Random House, 1977), having traced her adventure as a feminist, she posited a new stage for feminism which she called "metafeminism." This "metafeminism" is more fully explored and explained in her recent book Anatomy of Freedom (Doubleday, 1982). Influenced by ideas gathered from reading about quantum physics, Morgan contrasts the present "Special Theory of Feminism" with the future "General Theory of Feminism." The latter is described in this way:

> Theory begins to reach out beyond the loose confines of what has been considered the women's movement; the feminist vision begins to make an impact on all human beings, and, relative to their own situations, they make an impact in turn on feminism... (p. 294)

Noble as these sentiments and projections are, they smack of second-stagism to me. You know how it is said that when people are not functioning well at their current jobs, they are "kicked upstairs"? That is the phrase which kept haunting me as I read Morgan; is she kicking upstairs a troublesome feminism, taking

refuge in Utopian dreams rather than being willing to push on through the less pleasant current reality?

Similar to second-stagism in their potential violation of the movement's integrity are invitations to march along with the political left, an invitation one sees, for example, in Angela Davis' Women, Race, and Class (Random House, 1981). (The reader may wish to compare Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's article entitled "The Personal is not Political Enough," in Marxist Perspectives, winter, 1979-80, pp. 94-113.) Relationships between the women's movement and any male-dominated political movement, whether of the left or of the right (not that the right has been issuing any invitations recently) inevitably end in subordination of women's demands to so-called "human" issues.

In mentioning Angela Davis' book, and all the while refusing the invitation it seems to me to contain, I must also state that this very strong book had a tremendous impact on me in making clear what I view as a second facet of the present crisis in feminism: that is, the reality of the black woman's objection to white woman's feminism and how deeply justified is that objection. Evelyn Torton Beck's Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology (Persephone Press, 1982), which I read later, followed up strongly on that impact.

Beck exposes anti-Semitism in the women's movement as forcefully as Davis exposes black/white racism. (The reader may also wish to read Bell Hooks' Ain't I a Woman--South End Press, 1981; Margaret A. Simons,"Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood," Feminist Studies 5, Summer, 1979, 389-401; Michelle Wallace, Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman, and a recent article in, I believe, Feminist Studies, by BonnieThornton Dill--I apologize

to the reader for having momentarily lost track of the latter two references. There is a fairly extensive literature on the black feminism/white feminism issue, many items of which are unacceptable to large segments of the black community.) Beck states

> Being Jewish informs a woman's consciousness from the time she is young until she grows old, no matter how far from religion her family may be. Add to this the consciousness of a lesbian identity, and you create yet different patterns of seeing and experiencing the world. For Sephardic Jews and Jewish lesbians of color, the angles of vision become more multiple and more complex.

Advocates of "sisterhood" may want to point out the dangers of our emphasizing our internal differences. Their warnings are not without basis: the danger of a loss incurred by divisions is entirely a realistic one. Yet our differences are there; the battle-cry of sisterhood has tended toward a blurring of them which has not contributed to understanding and harmony but rather to alienation and discord. Therefore we must explore them, our own and those of others. But because there are dangers, this very exploration represents a crisis for us as a movement, as surely as does cooptation by alien ideologies.

Of this dual crisis, if the second (our differences) is potentially creative, the first (violation of autonomy) seems unlikely to be so. It is most probably related, at least in part, to discouragement engendered by the conservative trend of our country and by the hostility of our current government toward feminist issues. This state of affairs contrasts with the situation in France, where the socialist government of François Mitterrand is well-disposed toward women's issues and has revived,

though at a lower level, the ministry for women's issues first instituted and then abolished by the Giscard d'Estaing administration. Government support is encouraging and invigorating, even when one feels impatience, dissatisfaction, or even disagreement with specific initiatives.

However, there are bitter divisions within French feminism today. If Freidan provides the focal point of our crisis, that same role has been played in France by a group which took over the label MLF (mouvement de la libération des femmes) through copyright law, a label which previously had applied to a pluralistic French feminist movement. This group had at one time called itself "psychoanalysis and politics" and then, later, "politics and psychoanalysis." The take-over means, among other things, that France now has one identifiable group which claims to be the women's movement.

It is an active group which is moving on a number of fronts. It has established a publishing house, called "édition des femmes," as well as a bookstore in Paris, with two branches, in Marseille and Lyon. There is also a magazine called "des femmes en mouvement," which reports matters of interest to the women's movement in other countries, cultural events of particular appeal to women, past actions which contain lessons for the current scene, and accounts of the MLF's activities. Most recent and notable among the latter is the creation of a women's union, called the "Confédération Syndicale des Femmes," which has branches working with three aspects of the woman as worker or producer: producer of children, of work in the home, and of work outside the home. "Women thrice workers" is its overall theme, and to judge from a meeting of the

union which I attended in the summer of 1982, the socialist government has addressed itself specifically to this group, among others perhaps, for suggestions. The union has loose ties with similar movements inother countries, both in Europe and in Latin America.

The founding and guiding spirit behind the diverse activities of the MLF is a psychoanalyst named Antoinette Fouque, most frequently referred to by her first name alone. The MLF group, as its original names indicate, is deeply influenced by the philosophies of Freud and of Marx. It adamantly refuses the label "feminist," in theory at least, which it associates with the middle-class and with a non-revolutionary desire on the part of members of that class to get a piece of the patriarchal pie. Unlike other women who think of themselves as part of the women's movement, the MLF does not consider itself to be a continuation of the feminist movement of the nineteenth century, a large segment of which, it is true, was dominated by the liberal, republican bourgeoisie and held what seem now to have been rather timid reformist aims.

Of course the MLF is in fact not to be identified with the movement as a whole in France, since many other groups are at work. Each person/group pursues goals of its own according to its own theoretical basis. To generalize, then, the French movement is factionalized by the self-separation of the MLF group. Further, within those groups which have not aligned themselves with the MLF, there are internal frictions. The radical femininsts who once collaborated on the magazine Questions Féministes, for example, feel equally uncomfortable with the MLF and with a reformist

such as Gisèle Halimi and her group"Choisir." At the same time the Questions Féministes group itself experienced a split in its ranks, with one group going on the publish the Nouvelles Questions Féministes. Among and within all of the groups, including the MLF, there are mutual accusations over such basic issues as reformism and radicalism.

The MLF proceeds from the basis of a Marxist and Freudian analysis, however demystified or deconstructed or reinterpreted its spokeswomen may claim their own version of it is. In that I see no less danger of cooptation than in second-stagism or in assimilation to the political left. For me, this makes the validity of its feminism suspect. Suspect also is the MLF's impulse to centralized the movement under its own aegis. As one of its French critics, Anne Tristan, has stated

> To claim to represent the women's movement is to remain in the centralizing categories of the male world; it is to betray the multiformity of the movement. (in Histoires du MLF by Anne Tristan and Annie de Pisan, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1977)

Tristan's criticism suggests that the MLF represents the same kind of danger to the French women's movement as a too-facile "sisterhood" in the United States. Whether differences among French feminists can be examined and used creatively is a question which they have answered perhaps even less satisfactorily than we have at this point, in that they have a tendency to state those differences in abstract ideological terms rather than coming to grips with personal and situational underpinnings.

It seems, in short, that despite much in terms of history, current political realities, habits of thought, and culture that we do not have in common with the French, in the final analysis one can discern a quite similar dual crisis in feminism in the two countries. I would like to indicate finally that at this very moment of crisis, French and American feminist thinkers and writers have a great deal to say to each other which can be mutually clarifying and suggestive. That is to say, thetwo small parts of the world-wide women's movement as a whole, by sounding out our differences, can bring to view previously obscured assumptions, hidden traps, unexamined and therefore dangerous patterns of thought. May I suggest a couple of such "dia-readings" and go into a bit more detail regarding one in particular. Insofar as the history of the movements can throw light on the present moment, I would suggest a dia-reading of Anne Tristan and Annie de Pisan's Histoires du MLF and Robin Morgan's Going Too Far, since both books tells, from very personal perspectives, whatit was like to be involved in feminism from the late 1960's until the late 1970's. It would be most instructive to think out the implications of the differences between the actions undertaken, the fundamental issues, the causes espoused, the points of origin, the role of women's studies. But there is time today for only one remark: in the very histories of our movements there exists this distinction: that the influence of Freudian and neo-Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, so essential to French feminist thought, has not been a major factor in the American scene up to now. This means that American and French writers who base their thought on the field of psychology have

proceeded in quite different ways. (In The Future of Difference, edited by Eisenstein and Jardine, the reader can find excellent articles by Carolyn Burke and Jane Gallop which attempt to introduce French psychoanalytic thinking for an American audience.) In my view, both ways have exciting insights and yet serious flaws which are illuminated when one causes them to enter into a dialogue with each other. This is the dia-reading I would like to illustrate in more detail.

Carole Gilligan's new book, based on the discipline of developmental psychology and called In a Different Voice (Harvard, 1982), is being widely read by American women at this point, I believe, and is a positive and yet typical example of the application of the American understanding of psychology to women. The book is helpful to feminist thought in that it exposes the bias inherent in male-modeled theories and scales used to understand and measure human ethical development; further, it valorizes female patterns of development and judgment, which Gilligan calls an ethic of nurturance, responsibility, relationship and care, as opposed to a male morality of rights. She shows how female emphasis on attachment, intimacy, love, and connection has at least as much value as the male's emphasis on separation, individuation, identity, and work.

The usefulness of Gilligan's work is in its positive assessment of what has in fact long been associated with a female way of being and judging. Its danger becomes apparent, however, if we take the statements she makes about the individual and read them at the level of the political. On that plane, Gilligan's woman seems unlikely

to be able to adhere for any length to either of the principles I have been advocating: she will not wish to see women act as a group or entity which must, for the time being, refuse relationships with groups outside itself, nor is she well-suited to dealing with divisive internal differences within her group. Her rather motherly or sisterly yearning for relationship will make her extremely uncomfortable with these points of view, while at the same time making her vulnerable to domination by the males, who do not share her values. It is at this point that the French psychoanalytical approach may help American thought out of this potential political impasse.

French writers familiar with French-style psychoanalysis have the great merit of trying to step, as it were, behind the scenes; of not describing what is and pronouncing it good or bad, but rather of destroying the very categories through which we think of the so-called feminine and masculine. I quote Hélène Cixous, a prominent MLF leader, in La Jeune Née (with Catherine Clément, Paris, 10/18, 1975 p 152.)

> There is neither destiny nor nature or essence but rather living structures, taken up, sometimes frozen in historico-cultural limits which are so confused with the scene of History that it has been for a long time and still is difficult to think or even imagine the "something else"... Men and women are caught in a network of cultural determinations thousands of years old and of an almost unanalyzable complexity; one cannot talk about the woman or the man without being caught up in an ideological theater where the multiplication of representations, images, reflections, myths, and identifications transforms, deforms, changes the imagination of each person and cuts off the possibility of conceptualization.

Writers such as this do not take for granted, as Gilligan does, that they know what the subject "he" or "she" refers to. They question the nature of the subject in a radical way, one which promises to open both the personal and the political to entirely new perspectives.

And yet (here I want to turn the dia-reading in the opposite direction) I cannot avoid a certain distrust of the French dependence on psychoanalysis, because of the danger it involves of being caught up, finally, in yet another patriarchal way of thinking. I see that happening to Cixous, for example, when she tells us that woman is bisexual b nature, that her libido is "cosmic" and that therefore her writing (and her sexuality)

> can only pursue itself, without every inscribing or discerning contours, daring to cross dizzingly over to the other, making ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, then, with whom she stays no longer than the time it takes to look... and then, further along, infused with these brief identificatory embrasses, she leaves and passes on indefinitely. (From le Rire de la Méduse (The laugh of the Medusa), l'Arc, #61, 1975, p. 50. This translation and the one on the previous page are mine.)

This attempt to describe woman, her sexuality and her writing, in something other than banal and accustomed terms and phrases is exciting. But what, finally, is Cixous describing? I, for one, do not identify with the sexuality she describes. It seems to be rather like that which one sometimes associates, stereotypically, with male homosexuals--this infinite passing on, attributed in a rather cavalier way to "woman." This slippage from a very suggestive questioning of the nature of the male and the female,

indeed of whether there is any nature involved in such distinctions, to a description no less stereotypical, simply displaced from one sex to the other--that is where I locate the danger of proceeding from a patriarchal tradition. I hope this quick comparison indicates that as American and French women think through the matter of sexuality and its implications for social, political, or aesthetic life, we can profit from dialogue, falling as we do into different patriarchal traps along the way.

I too am this very moment falling, as you are, into those old emotional and mental traps. We have to be constantly suspicious of our most cherished assumptions because it is always tempting, especially susconsciously, automatically, to spin our wheels in familiar ruts. That is why dialogue with other women here in the United States and with those in France is essential to keep us totally feminist. Were there time today, I would enjoy suggesting other diareadings--adding Wittig and Daly or Rich and others. As it is, let me conclude simply by restating those stances which I believe are necessary in our two countries, that, to ~~being~~ with, this is time for a second stage which would involve merger with any group or continuation of any patriarchal ideology whatever. It is, rather, a time for us within and between our countries to examine those factors which divide us, all the while insisting on the primacy of the women's movement.